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ABSTRACT

This report on basic skills training at Norfolk State University (Virginia) profiles current activities and ascertains the perceptions of the faculty in order to develop general guidelines that might be useful for continued planning. Data from 107 questionnaires completed by Norfolk faculty show that they regard basic skills as critical for students in all programs and are aware of university efforts to focus attention on the development of basic skills. The quality of teaching related to basic skills training is seen as being mediocre and in need of considerable improvement. Faculty members see a large number of variables as critical to skills training, but highlight the need for more student involvement in planning and implementation. According to the faculty, students are offered opportunities to engage in activities that directly pertain to the four basic skill areas (reading, speaking, writing, and computation), but a clearer picture of the exact nature of student work in these areas is needed. Finally, the faculty does report giving direct feedback to students, but more information is needed about the frequency of such feedback before it can be determined whether students with basic deficits are getting the substantial amounts of feedback they need. (CMG)

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A REPORT ON BASIC SKILLS TRAINING

By

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Introduction

Norfolk State University shares with other insitutions the realization that many college students lack the basic skills necessary for study beyond the elementary or introductory level in the various academic disciplines. These skills include the ability to read, write, speak fluently, and perform mathematical computations.

In the past, the greater selectivity with respect to college enrollment essentially guaranteed that students would have at least the basic skills. However, presently, the greater accessibility of a college or university education means, in part, that the skills base of students is much broader, and occurrence that has resulted in the admittance of a number of students who lack certan fundational skills. Consequently, in addition to the traditional responsibilities, most institutions of higher education, particularly Norfolk State University, are including courses and/or support activities into their regular curriculum to assist students in developing one or more of the basic skills.

In light of the foregoing, the purpose of this report is to outline a current profile of activitis and attitudes concerning basic skills training. Specifically, the overall goal of this analysis is to ascertain the perceptions of the faculty on the topic of basic skills, and to develop some general guidelines which might be useful for continued planning.

Finally, this report is organized as follows: data and methods, empirical results and discussion and conclusion.

DATA AND METHODS

The data providing the empirical basis for this research were obtained from the general faculty at Norfolk State University during the autumn of 1980. One hundred and seven faculty members completed and returned a standardized questionnaire concerning a plethora of issues related to basic skills at the university.

A number of questions asked the respondents to rate specific aspects of basic skills along a seven-poing continuum ranging from "not well at all" or "not important at all" to extremely well" or extremely important. The questions were designed to elicit responses that would yield both a general and detailed assessment of the faculty impressions of, and involvement in, basic skills training. For purposes of inquiry, basic skills were nominally defined as:

> Those areas related to communicative and computational competencies. Competency is described operationally as the

> ability to read, speak, write and compute at a level sufficient to function successfully within the academic structure and in the larger socio-political socitey. Competency level is defined as the minimum level of proficency expected of college students. (Nolan, 1981).

This definition was utilized as the basic for responses to all items which dealt specifically with basic skills.

Finally, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and chi square) are used to analyze the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Qualifications

Chi square tests of statistical independence indicate that a significant porportion of the faculty members at Norfolk State University consider themselves qualified to teach students the basic skills in oral communication, reading, and writing; however, they did not feel competent to teach basic computational skills. (Babie, 1979). Specifically, a perusal of the data in Table I suggests that the facutly felt more qualified to teach writing skills and least qualified to teach computational skills, but, it is also evident that a great deal of variability exists with regard to qualifications. (Biesanz, 1975).

TABLE I

HOW QUALIFIED DO THE FACULTY FEEL TO TEACH BASIC SKILLS?

	Not Qualified At All						Highly Qualified			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N	X	SD
Oral Communication	8	5	7	23	21	21	20	104	4.8	1.54
Reading	8	7	9	23	18	14	22	101	4.6	1.83
Writing	8	5	6	19	15	24	28	105	5.0	1.83
Computational Skills	15	11	7	23	19	12	13	100	4.1	1.98

Also salient is the remarkably consistent distribution of faculty members' perceptions of their qualifications in the basic skills, except in one area. The data further indicate that Norfolk State University has a core of faculty members who consider themselves already competent to teach the fundamental skills. These faculty members would appear to

constitute an important resource in continued efforts to improve basic skills training. It is important to note, however, that may others do not feel qualified to teach in the basic skills areas and specific training for some of these faculty members may be advantageous for the University.

Indeed, when the faculty was asked about the desirability of additional training, fifty percent (N=47) expressed a definite interest while only twenty-five percent (N=27) did not desire additional training.

Quality of Teaching in the Basic Skill Areas:

With regard to quality of teaching in the basic skills areas, the faculty were asked to rate on going instruction on a seven point scale ranging from "not well at all" to "extremely well." These data are shown for both the university as a whoel and faculty members' self-evaluation.

TABLE II

HOW WELL DO THE FACULTY FEEL BASIC SKILLS ARE BEING TAUGHT AT NORFOLK STATE UNIVERSITY?

	Not Well At All						Extremerly Well			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N	X	SD
Oral Communication	2	17	22	27	15	10	5	98	3.9	1.45
Reading	4	9	19	21	18	16	9	96	4.3	1.60
Writing	4	10	22	25	13	14	9	97	4.1	1.59
Computational Skills	3	11	14	20	17	15	8	88	4.3	1.60

TABLE III

HOW WELL DO THE FACULTY MEMBERS FEEL BASIC SKILLS ARE BEING TAUGHT IN THEIR OWN COURSES?

	Not Well At All						Extremely Well			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N	X	SD
Oral Communication	5	10	11	18	28	15	12	99	4.5	1.65
Reading	8	9	12	21	21	15	9	95	4.3	1.70
Writing	14	4	6	11	26	16	24	101	4.7	2.01
Computational Skills	9	7	13	25	12	9	8	83	4.0	1.71

In general, basic skills training received an average rating (a scale value of 4) with minimal distinction noted among the four skill areas in terms of means and standard deviations. Apparent in the distributions of respones for both tables is the fact that there is considerable room for imporvement across all areas. This need for additional attention to basic skills is reinforced upon examining the faculty's perceptions of the importance of basic skills the point at issue of the next section.

Importance of Basic Skills

As shown below the general faculty clearly attaches great importance to attainment of basic skills.

TABLE IV

HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU FEEL EACH OF THE BASIC SKILLS IS IN YOUR AREA OF INSTRUCTION?

	Not Important At All						Extremely Well			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N	X	SD
Oral Communication	1	0	1	3	66	16	79	106	6.6	.96
Reading	0	1	1	2	1	13	87	105	6.7	.80
Writing	0	1	1	5	4	11	84	106	6.6	.95
Computational Skills	3	2	5	14	13	16	45	98	5.7	1.61

For oral communication, reading, and writing there was almost unanimous consent that the skills were extremely important. There was somewhat less support for computational skills. One would assume this noticeable deviation in response pattern is due to computational skills not being critical in some areas of instruction represented by these faculty.

One significant thing to not here is the high importance attached to basic skills compared to the only moderate level of perceived faculty competence and success related to basic skills training. It is difficult to envision that competence in the basic skills will become less important in the future; consequently, it may be expected that faculty will continue to want to improve in methods for dealing with basic skills deficiencies in their students.

Factors Related to Basic Skills Development:

In this regard, the faculty members were asked to rate the importance of seven factors in the development of basic skills. The data are presented on page 18.

TABLE V

WHEN CONSIDERING STUDENTS, HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU THINK EACH OF THE FOLLOWING FACTORS ARE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR BASIC SKILLS?

A Student's:	Not Important At All 1	2	3	4	5	6	Extremely Well 7	N	X	SD
Self Concept	0	2	1	5	9	21	77	104	6.3	1.09
Self Esteem	0	1	1	4	7	28	63	104	6.4	.95
Attitude	0	0	0	1	3	16	85	105	6.8	.94
Motivation	0	0	0	1	3	20	80	104	6.7	.56
Class Attendance	0	0	3	5	13	23	61	105	6.3	1.04
Previous Knowledge	0	1	5	16	21	26	37	106	5.7	1.27
Amount of Time for Studying	0	0	1	5	9	27	63	105	6.4	.90

In scanning the above table, one can readily see that the seven factors were rated as being extremely important in the development of basic skills. The attitude and motivation of students were perceived as being the more important factors, and there was little variability among the responses.

A conceptual analysis of the factors suggest one major commonality. That is, all of the factors are related to the students' own efforts to help himself or herself develop and/or improve basic skills. Thus, in light of the preceding, a large amount of responsibility for basic skills development is on the initiative of the students. This is consistent with the "achievement motivation" literatiure of the students. This is consistent with the "achievement motivation" literature concerning skill development. Briefly, it is argued that strong achievement motive and effort build up factors such as self-esteen, attitude, motivation, etc., which in turn, creates confidence that allows one to achieve more. (Biesanz and Biesanz, 1974: 258). The problem, of course, is that students who have the basic skills problems do not always possess attitudes, self concepts, and work/study characteristics. Consequently, faculty will probably find themselves working directly with a wide range of problems which are associated with, but clearly different from, the attainment of basic skills themselves.

One should also note in Table V that 'previous knowledge', although important, had the lower rating along with a great deal of response variability. This generally thought to be absolutely critical to learning. That is, learning or the attainment of basic skills is largely a function of the extent to which the student can relate current instruction to 'previous knowledge.' For example, before formulating a plan to develop or refine a student's writing ability, an instructor would want to know what prior knowledge or experience could be brought to bear on the task. Such a state of affairs would be beneficial to both the student and the instructor in addition to reducing the difficulty and complexity of basic skills development at institutions such as Norfolk State University.

Responsibilities for Learning

As alluded to above, students should be responsible for the attainment of basic skills. Thus, the faculty was asked: "Who has the responsibility for developing basic skills of students once they have enrolled at Norfolk State University?"

Forty-one percent (N=38) of the faculty members indicated that students were most responsible for themselves. The faculty also disclosed some degree of responsibility to the students, particularly those faculty members teaching in areas directly related to basic skills (e.g. English, Reading, Speech, Mathematics). In addition twenty-two percent (N=21) of the total faculty contended that the faculty teaching transitional courses should also assume responsibility for basic skill development.

An important implication of the results of this survey seem to indicate that a systematic attempt should be made to inform all students of their own responsibility for development in the basic skills area. Furthermore, it appears that the faculty feels that unless students are an integral part of the process, the measures taken by the faculty at Norfolk State University will only be partially effective.

Opportunities Offered

What opportunities do students have for basic skill development within the experiences provided by faculty at Norfolk State University? In this survey, faculty were asked to indicate the frequency with which they offered formal and informal opportunities in each of the four basic skill areas. These data are shown below in terms of absolute number and percentage of faculty responding.

Do you offer formal opportunities (related to basic skills) for your students?

TABLE VI

DO YOU OFFER FORMAL OPPORTUNITIES (RELATED TO BASIC SKILLS) FOR YOUR STUDENTS?

	Speaking Skills		Reading Skills		Writing Skills		Computational Skills	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Almost Always	45	43.3	34	33.7	55	52.9	17	18.3
Sometimes	52	50.0	46	45.5	40	38.5	37	39.8
Never	7	6.7	21	20.8	9	8.7	39	41.9
Total	104	100	101	100	104	100	93	100

TABLE VII

DO YOU OFFER INFORMAL OPPORTUNITIES (RELATED TO BASIC SKILLS) FOR YOUR STUDENTS?

	Speaking Skills		Reading Skills		Writing Skills		Computational Skills	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Almost Always	54	55.1	30	30.9	36	35.6	14	15.7
Sometimes	44	44.9	45	46.4	49	48.5	33	37.1
Never	0	0	22	22.7	16	15.8	42	47.2

Regarding formal opportunities, most faculty provide significant experience in speaking, reading, and writing. However, mathematics receives somewhat less attention, with almost forty-two percent (N=39) of the faculty never offering formal opportunities. It is also of interest that about twenty-one percent (N=20) never offer formal reading experiences.

The distribution of opportunities offered informally is very similar, with mathematics receiving much less attention than other areas. Also, it is somewhat surprising that twenty-one percent and sixteen percent, respectively, never offer reading and writing opportunities even informally. Of course, these data should be interpreted with the understanding that faculty may have varying ideas concerning what constitutes an informal reading and/or writing opportunity. Nevertheless, it may be useful to investigate further any findings which show that certain basic skills are never practiced in given courses/programs.

Methods for Dealing with Errors in the Basic Skills Areas

In order to obtain a better idea as to how faculty dealt directly with students in the basic skills areas, faculty were asked to indicate how they dealt with errors. These data are shown here for each of the four basic skill areas.

TABLE VIII

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING METHODS DO YOU USE IN CORRECTING ORAL MISTAKES?

	Number of Faculty Using Strategy
Immediately in class	78
Individual conferences	77
Never discussed	12
Other	16

TABLE IX

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING METHODS DO YOU USE IN CORRECTING READING PROBLEMS?

	Number of Faculty Using Strategy
Immediately in class	59
Individual conferences	70
Written comment on returned work	84
Never discussed	6
Other	2

TABLE X

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING METHODS DO YOU USE IN CORRECTING WRITTEN MISTAKES?

	Number of Faculty Using Strategy
Immediately in class	42
Individual conference	78
Written comment on returned work	96
Never discussed	1
Other	6

TABLE XI

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING METHODS DO YOU USE IN CORRECTING COMPUTATIONAL MISTAKES?

	Number of Faculty Using Strategy
Immediately in class	42
Individual conferences	35
Written comment on returned work	43
Never discussed	9
Other	14

By examining each of the questions, one can readily see that, overall, faculty members have a strong tendency to offer individual feedback (either direct verbal or written comments). Also, it is important to note that a great deal of immediate feedback is given. These trends are promising; one would certainly worry about basic skill development if faculty had a tendency not to give direct feedback to students. One caution should be mentioned, however, in interpreting these data. That is, it is not possible to determine the absolute amount and frequency of feedback given by faculty. Later, when more refined analyses are performed it would be helpful to determine whether students receive **enough** feedback to facilitate improvement in their skills of reading, writing, speaking, and computation.

CONCLUSIONS

What, the can be concluded from this investigation of faculty perceptions? Several points seem important enough to reiterate and these are given below:

1. It is safe to assume from these findings that basic skills are seen by faculty at Norfolk State University as being absolutely critical for students enrolled in all programs.
2. Further, faculty are aware of efforts being made by the university to focus attention on development of basic skills. Essentially, basic skills training might be described, for practical purposes, as being one "mission" of the university.
3. Quality of teaching related to basic skills training is not seen as being uniformly excellent. Although there was much variability in faculty perceptions on the issue of quality, the overall picture indicates a medium level of quality with considerable room for improvement.
4. The task of basic skills training is complex as evidenced by faculty beliefs that a large number of variables are critical to successful training. The key successful training seems to lie largely with the students themselves. One issue which should be examined in the future is how to involve students more fruitfully in planning and implementing individual programs of self improvement in areas of basic skill deficit.
5. Generally, the faculty does offer opportunities for students to engage in activities that pertain directly to the four basic skill areas. It is not clear, however, what proportion of these experiences (e.g., formal speaking, writing, required reading, computational tasks) are instructional in nature. Engaging in these activities could involve informative feedback designed to correct deficiencies, but realistically could also involve nothing more than practice of old errors. There needs to be a clearer picture of the exact nature of student work in basic skill areas.
6. Finally, the faculty does report giving direct feedback to students, either immediately during class or afterwards in written comments and/or individual conferences. This trend is encouraging. However, there needs to be more information generated about the frequency of such feedback.It would seen that students who have basic deficits would need a substantial amount of feedback and it is not yet clear whether that is happening.

In summary, the Norfolk State University faculty seems to be knowledgeable about, and genuinely interested in basic skills development. Moreover, these faculty seem to have a realistic feeling about the university's success in this area, as well as some ideas as to conditions needed for continued progress.

NOTES

1. Chi square is a frequently used test of significance in social science. Briefly, this statistic indicates whether the relationship between two variables is statistically significant or whether the relationship occured by chance. (See, for example, Babbie, 1979: 486-489). The computed chi squares for oral communication, reading and writing (22.82, 11.54 and 26.80, respectively) were statistically signigicant at the 0.05 level of signigicance. The chi square for computational skills was 0.58 which was not statistically signigicant.

2. Variability is discussed by examining the standard deviation with respect to the men. Briefly, the standard deviation is a measure of dispersion of variability that indicates how the responses are distributed across all possible response choices. (See, for example. Sharp. 1979: 74-84).

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2. Computerized results of the study were provided by the University Computer Center.

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